

Project S.A.R.A.H.

A Domestic Violence Program Eroding Denial in the Orthodox Jewish Community in New Jersey

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A 12-year-old program, Project S.A.R.A.H. (Stop Abusive Relationships At Home) was developed in New Jersey as an organized communal response to the issue of domestic violence within the Orthodox Jewish community. An approach that incorporated community education with improved access to professional services has enabled increasing numbers of Jewish victims to seek and receive help in New Jersey.

Domestic violence is the willful intimidation, assault, battery, sexual assault, or other abusive behavior perpetrated by an intimate partner against another. National data from the U.S. Department of Justice report that one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime (Rennison, 2000). New Jersey has a Jewish population of 485,000 (Singer, 2002). Of that number, 10% or 48,000 are defined as Orthodox (Vande Hei, 2006). Extrapolating from the national data, one would conservatively estimate that 6,000 cases of domestic abuse within the Orthodox Jewish community would meet the criteria for domestic violence. That does not include the psychological, verbal, and financial abuses that are part of the abuse continuum but do not reach the level of domestic violence.

In 1994, Project S.A.R.A.H (Stop Abusive Relationships At Home), a domestic

violence education and treatment program in New Jersey, was founded. At that time there were no data on domestic violence's prevalence within the Orthodox Jewish community in New Jersey and no organized service delivery programs to members of that community.

The reasons for the lack of data about the incidence of domestic violence in the Orthodox Jewish community are embedded in Orthodox practice and Orthodox communal life. Orthodox Judaism is the umbrella term for Jews who are committed to biblically based practices passed down through the oral law and rabbinic tradition. Practitioners follow Jewish law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, and holidays (Orthodox Judaism, 2007). Observance of Jewish law is broadly similar among most Orthodox Jews, but differs in the details,

based on individuals' relationship to the authority of their rabbi and their geographic origin.

Because of the Sabbath observance rule, which prohibits driving, Orthodox families live within walking distance of synagogues. Concentrated communities result, with the social life of the families heavily synagogue-based. Lack of participation in synagogue life is clearly noted and questioned, and public exposure of family problems is fraught with shame. This public exposure can have ramifications for children's marriage potential, family status, and social contacts. Families with abuse and violence usually only came to public attention when the problem was so glaring that legal interventions were necessary. The culture of Orthodox observance, as well as the general attitude of mutual respect with which Jews were expected to conduct themselves (Zlotowitz, 1986), contributed to the denial that domestic violence existed within the Orthodox Jewish community and created the need for a programmatic communal response.

STAGE I—DEVELOPMENT OF A PLANNED APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

In 1994, a group of professional social workers from Jewish family service agencies in New Jersey, volunteers who were interested in the issue of domestic violence, rabbis' wives, shelter directors, and representatives of major Jewish women's organizations, such as Jewish Women International and the National Council of Jewish Women, came together to explore the issue of services for abused Jewish women. This group called itself the New Jersey Jewish Women's Consortium on Domestic Violence (NJJWC); thus began the development of a communal response.

One member of the consortium was familiar with the work of the Shalom Task Force in New York City (Silver, 1998), which was made up of women volunteers trained to respond to domestic violence

calls. The Shalom Task Force approach was based on marketing principles. An ad campaign targeted the Orthodox community. Its ads stated, "It Hurts to Call a Domestic Violence Hot Line, It Hurts More Not To. Do It for Yourself. Do It for Your Children." Most critical to the success of this venture was the tag line—"endorsed by leading *Rabbanim* (rabbis)—which was followed by a local telephone number. These ads were placed in Anglo-Jewish newspapers and in ritual baths throughout the metropolitan area.

The consortium member who was familiar with this work felt that the New Jersey community could benefit from the experience of the Shalom Task Force, and suggested a meeting to explore working together. Thus there was a vision for the project's initial work and a willingness from its inception to be guided by the wisdom of other programs.

The second driving force within the consortium was the participation of two public shelter directors in the initial planning group. Shortly after the group began meeting, the State of New Jersey Attorney General issued an RFP (request for proposal). This was a "pass through" proposal from the federally sponsored Stop the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). In this proposal, the state was required to allocate 15% of its federal funding to programs that served "underserved populations" that for linguistic, cultural, or other reasons were unable to access the public system of protection for women. To obtain the funding there had to be a partnership between a traditional domestic violence provider and a group that had access to the underserved population. The existing relationship between the battered women's shelter, the Passaic County Women's Center, an inner-city shelter located in Paterson, New Jersey, and the Jewish Family Service located in Clifton, which had extensive outreach into the Orthodox community, positioned them to respond to this proposal and obtain the initial funding to launch the project.

In the initial grant, a request was made to enter into a contractual relationship with the Shalom Task Force. The Shalom Task Force would provide the hotline service, and Project S.A.R.A.H. would develop the culturally appropriate response system and provide resource information to the hotline volunteers.

STAGE II—DEVELOPING THE STATEWIDE RESPONSE SYSTEM

Project S.A.R.A.H. had defined itself as a statewide response system, which was feasible because there was an existing statewide network of Jewish Family Service (JFS) agencies that covered every county in New Jersey. However, the staff at these agencies, primarily clinical social workers, did not have specific training in domestic violence. Therefore, the first task was to train staff in every JFS agency in the basics of domestic violence. Here, again, there was a fortuitous confluence of events. The trainer for the hotline responders on the Shalom Task Force, Dr. Cheryl Kramer, lived in New Jersey and was very interested in seeing an expansion of service to the New Jersey Jewish community. She had years of clinical experience in domestic violence and was a master teacher. She developed a 12-hour course in domestic violence for social workers and offered it under the auspices of Project S.A.R.A.H. to a representative from every JFS agency in New Jersey. At the initial training 8 of the 14 JFS agencies sent at least one staff member, and some agencies sent more than one.

As of 2007, there are five agency-based, fully functional domestic violence programs located in JFS agencies in New Jersey—Project S.A.R.A.H. of Mercer County, Project S.A.R.A.H. of Cherry Hill, Union County Jewish Family Service, Rachel Coalition in Essex County, and the central Project S.A.R.A.H. office in Clifton. In addition, every JFS agency in New Jersey has at least one staff member trained and equipped to handle domestic violence calls. Project S.A.R.A.H. provides ongoing staff

development and consultation to these agencies.

The advantages of using the JFS system are many. Every JFS agency provides free or low-cost services to members of the Jewish community who are unable to pay, as well as short-term emergency financial assistance; this is particularly important for domestic violence victims, who often have no access to funds or cannot let their partner know that they are seeking services. Because the JFS serves many needs, a woman coming in is not immediately identifiable as a domestic violence victim. In addition, the JFS system has access to ancillary services for families in distress. For example, many provide child therapy services and vocational services, and some have access to legal resources.

After the Shalom Task Force volunteers were given the appropriate resource information, an organized response system could be implemented. It soon became clear that the Shalom Task Force local phone number was itself a barrier for women seeking total anonymity. Project S.A.R.A.H. began negotiating to change to an 800 number, and ultimately did so. Having this toll-free number also provided the impetus for the Shalom Task Force to expand as a hotline provider to communities across the United States, replicating the model that was developed for New Jersey.

STAGE III—COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The next task was to begin speaking about the issue of domestic violence in the community. The first and most influential group targeted for community education was the rabbinic community. As the gatekeepers for the lives of Orthodox Jews, the rabbis are in the position to respond both on individual and communal levels in ways that will have a profound impact on victims. We anticipated that once rabbis would begin to speak about the issue from the pulpit, there would be a weakening of the climate of denial. The more the rabbis would use

the word “abuse” publicly, the less alone the victims would feel.

Several methods of outreach were used to reach the rabbis. At the initiation of the project, a major rabbinic training seminar was offered in a central location in the state. It included presentations by a respected rabbinic figure and an expert in the domestic violence field. No fee was charged and a meal was provided. Every rabbi from every denomination in the state of New Jersey received a personal phone call in addition to a formal invitation. At the event, materials were provided that each rabbi could take home, such as personal rolodex cards with local resources and contact information. This event and all subsequent training events were taped so that copies could be distributed to those rabbis who did not attend.

Over the years, the rabbinic seminar has become an annual event. It has been a major challenge to develop presentations that would entice rabbis to come for second, third, fourth, and fifth trainings on domestic violence. The venue and time have been varied, and the topics are constantly refined based on feedback from participants. Topics have included “Men and Anger,” “Child Sexual Abuse,” “Maintaining Balance,” “Dealing with Difficult Congregants,” “Interface Between the Rabbinic Court and the Public Court System,” and “Rabbi as Healer.” The format has changed from didactic to experiential, from formal after-dinner events to a Saturday night *melava malka*—a festive meal with the rabbis and their spouses invited.

The goal of each seminar, however, has remained the same: to increase the range of responses a rabbi can have to a congregant who presents as a possible victim and to position the rabbi to be a spokesman for the victims. Its effectiveness can be illustrated by this rabbinic response. Shortly after one training event, a Project S.A.R.A.H. client called her rabbi. Her husband had beaten her so severely that she had to be hospitalized. He had been taken to jail and had called the rabbi to bail him out. The rabbi

came to visit, but refused the bail request. He gave a clear message to the batterer that the violence was unacceptable.

Since 2003, Project S.A.R.A.H. has launched a public education campaign each year, “Many Voices One Message,” timed to coincide with National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. During the campaign rabbis are asked to speak publicly or conduct one adult education or fundraising event on domestic violence in their synagogue. Educational materials, sample sermons, and speakers are offered to the rabbis to assist their participation in this campaign. All the participating rabbis are listed in ads in the Anglo-Jewish press. Participation in this campaign has grown from 30 to 114 rabbis, which represents a potential impact on 10,000 people. When the campaign first began the typical rabbinic response was, “Do you know of a case of domestic violence in my community?” Today, the rabbis seek to be included.

The second group targeted for education are attendants at ritual baths. The ritual bath is a safe space for women who are of menstruating age. Because they go to the ritual bath or *mikveh* on a monthly basis and at a time of impending intimacy with the spouse, the attendant can develop a special relationship with their clients. *Mikveh* attendants may notice that some clients are reluctant to return home following immersion; sometimes they sense their clients’ wish to talk about personal matters. Their training in sensitivity to the issues that may confront the women they encounter has been a critical piece in providing many portals of entry to service for abuse victims. The *mikveh* attendant training takes place on an annual basis and is also done in a way that minimizes barriers—it is free of charge, and babysitting and a meal are provided. The topics are varied so that the attendants can expect to learn new skills at each meeting, and the venue changes so it is convenient to women in different parts of the state.

A third target group for the Project S.A.R.A.H. training efforts is mental health

professionals. Contributing to the collusive denial about domestic violence in the Jewish community was the failure of clinicians to ask the questions that would facilitate identification of this issue. For example, few clinicians routinely asked these questions at intake: "You talk about stress in your relationship; are you afraid? What causes you that stress? Has anyone ever hit you? Who was it?" They did not ask these questions partly because they did not know what to do if someone said yes. Similarly the men were not asked, "Is your spouse afraid of you? Have you ever hit her?" Clinicians would hear a woman reporting, "I feel like I have to walk on eggshells around him," and not realize that this was a clue that the woman was living in an abusive relationship. One clinician called the project to report that her client's boyfriend had broken her arm, but she was uncertain about how to assess for possible domestic violence and to begin planning for client safety, both critical elements in domestic violence treatment.

Lack of training for mental health clinicians increases the potential danger for these clients. A clinician who works to help a woman leave a relationship, but who has failed to designate it as a domestic violence case, may not be aware that the potential danger for the woman escalates at the point of leaving. This lack of awareness may lead to inadequate safety planning. Project S.A.R.A.H. training has worked to erode the denial within the clinical community and develop a shared vocabulary for these cases, while assisting clinicians in developing a range of appropriate responses to these life-threatening family situations. Project S.A.R.A.H. is always available for phone consultations and has helped scores of therapists provide more adequate responses to their clients in need.

The fourth group that has been trapped in the denial are the victims. They do not recognize the issues that have contributed to their isolation, feelings of depression, and the loss of personal power and control over their own lives. After they walk

through the door of Project S.A.R.A.H., they will be offered an understanding of the conditions under which they are living. They are given the power and control wheel (Duluth, 1980), a widely accepted tool to help victims visualize the circular nature of the conditions under which they may be living. The wheel enables the client to identify, with concrete examples from her own life, the various tactics that may be used in the relationship, such as intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, male privilege, economic abuse, and coercion and threats. Once victims understand that these experiences are part of a continuum of methods to exert power and control, they can begin their own work of deciding how to respond (Abuse Counseling & Treatment, Inc, 2007). Under the gentle guidance of expert staff, they are supported in recognizing that they are in abusive relationships. Once this recognition occurs, the opportunities for healing and safety planning emerge. This work can take years.

A victim's decision to seek out the services of Project S.A.R.A.H. can begin when she hears a sermon about domestic violence. She can venture an anonymous call, or she may ask for an appointment and come once. She can engage in long-term treatment, with many stops and starts as the issues facing her and her family surface. Often, her children and their responses are the impetus to her help-seeking. Her husband can receive individual counseling services or participate in a weekly group for men. Project S.A.R.A.H. is committed to providing the service that the clients are seeking. For some, it means helping them leave the relationship. For others, it means working to maintain a family structure with less abuse and violence and a movement toward partnership and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, Project S.A.R.A.H. has received more than 1,000 calls. More than 100 victims from the Orthodox community have accessed the clinical services at

the Jewish Family Service in Clifton, and many more have used the other services throughout New Jersey. Women from all denominations have accessed the project, and no one is refused service. Women have used an array of services on behalf of themselves and their families: they have participated in ongoing support groups, have come for weekly individual counseling, have called the hotline anonymously many times before walking through the door, and have encouraged their husbands to attend the men's group, the only group for voluntarily participating Jewish men in New Jersey. They have received free legal consultations and assistance in all aspects of legal services, day care assistance, summer camp assistance, emergency food, emergency psychiatric evaluations and care, medications, services for their children, referral for vocational services, couples counseling, and group sessions with their therapist and their rabbi.

In 2007 the cases seeking assistance from Project S.A.R.A.H. have increased in frequency and complexity. More of the victims are young women with personal difficulties that hinder their capacity to either leave the abusive relationship or to make more appropriate demands of their spouse. More of the victims have histories or current experiences of sexual abuse. Some of the victims are men.

In each of these cases a major shift in the perspective of the victim has taken place. Each woman was able to identify her own denial of the reality of the abuse under which she was living, and recognize a truth about her own life that permitted her more

choices. None of these victims would have been able to walk through the door and access the array of available resources if the community denial had not been eroded through many years of work.

It is challenging to continue this work. The financial and social forces that give these services a low priority are constant obstacles to program maintenance. The denial has been penetrated at many levels, but it quickly resurfaces if those who are working on this project relax their vigilance. Project S.A.R.A.H., along with the many other domestic violence advocacy programs around the country, seeks to provide each victim with the opportunity for a life of choice rather than control.

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